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SUBJECT: ERICKA OVETTE AND PAUL PIEPER DAZZLE SYRIANS WITH AMERICAN JAZZ

¶1. SUMMARY: Against a backdrop of bilateral tension and violence in Lebanon, Ericka Ovette and Paul Pieper's visit to Syria brought American music back to Damascus and proved that we can promote American culture even as the SARG sabotages other Embassy events. Ovette and Pieper reached an impressive number of Syrians from a wide variety of backgrounds. The duo restarted musical cooperation with the Higher Institute of Music and connected with local talent and audiences thirsting for contact with authentic American musicians. END SUMMARY.

¶2. After a nearly four-year hiatus, an ECA Performing Arts Initiative grant reinvigorated our musical programming in Damascus overnight. Unlike previous years, the Syria government (SARG) presented no obstacles to the program. Even with the outbreak of violence in Lebanon and U.S. condemnation of the Syrian role, contacts at the Ministry of Culture remained receptive to more cultural programming in Syria.

¶3. Ericka Ovette and Paul Pieper descended on Damascus for a six-day visit that received extensive coverage in both private and government media and reopened doors for the Embassy to Syria's large community of musicians and music lovers. Reaching audiences in diverse venues, the performers prompted a unified response: We have missed American cultural programs and we want more of them. This sentiment was affirmed when Ovette and Pieper's two-hour public concert filled a local theater to standing-room-only capacity, reaching an audience of 800 people.

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Reopening Doors  
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¶4. Ovette and Pieper conducted a series of master classes at Syria's Higher Institute of Music. In a sign of institutional approval, the Director participated in the first hour of their program with vocalists and guitarists. Local media covered the classes, revelling not only in the intimate musical give-and-take between Ovette, Pieper and their Syrian pupils, but also drawn by the opportunity to interview American jazz musicians on their musical philosophies and expertise. Students enthusiastically responded when Ovette and Pieper swapped seats and became the students for a tutorial in oriental singing and oriental musical tradecraft. This heart-felt exchange played well here, as Syrians responded not only to the jazz duet's talent but also their sincere interest in expanding musical horizons. Upon conclusion of their last master class, the Director of the Higher Institute of Music asked Ovette and Pieper to write up their impressions and comments on their experience at the Institute.

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Media Blitz  
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¶5. Sensing media willingness to extend coverage of cultural issues, Embassy Damascus crafted an aggressive press outreach campaign to publicize our first public concert in nearly four years. (We

specifically avoided highlighting the Embassy's role in bringing the duo, however.) Both state-run media and private stations clamored for the opportunity to speak with Ovette and Pieper. Coverage of the master classes, as well as the main concert, focused on the uniquely American attributes of jazz, as well as on Ovette and Pieper's own personal musical philosophies.

¶16. The media placements gave Ovette and Pieper a forum to discuss the importance of jazz as an American institution and to provide journalists with a mini-tutorial on the historical significance of the five African-American jazz vocalists to whom they pay tribute during their show. Themes like freedom, peace, and civil rights were woven into Ovette and Pieper's comments and were reported verbatim in the local press. Ovette and Pieper expressed directly to Syrians their appreciation for their hospitality, warmth and friendliness.

¶17. Syrians warmly received Ovette and Pieper, reflecting the general desire for a better relationship with the U.S. and more cultural engagement. The local correspondent of the widely-read tabloid "Baladna" commented to Emboff that his interview with Ericka and Paul had received the most hits on the Baladna website on the day after their main concert on Sunday, May 11. He attributed this achievement to Syrians' hunger for American musicians and culture.

¶18. Private TV station al-Dunya recorded an hour long interview with Pieper and Ovette then recorded the entire public concert. They began airing the whole package as soon as the live event ended.

¶19. COMMENT: Ovette and Pieper's visit to Damascus was the highest profile cultural programming we have done in recent years and highlighted a continuing hunger in the Syrian public for more. Tensions between Washington and Damascus remain, but the absence of

official SARG intervention suggests that there may now be more willingness to permit American cultural activities. We will continue to exploit this opening for as long as it continues. END COMMENT.

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